

## Preface

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## PREFACE

It will soon be forty years since Edward Said's book *Orientalism* appeared, yet it remains a crucial reference point for most of the research on Europe's cultural encounters with and policies towards the rest of the world, regardless of whether scholars uphold or critique the Saidian model. The other crucial factors in transforming the studies of Europe's imperial and colonial past were the collapse of communism and the demise of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. On the one hand, these historical developments have encouraged the application of the postcolonial theory to the study of cultures and politics of new regions. On the other, the thoroughgoing questioning of the Cold War paradigms has allowed scholars to move away from hitherto dominant essentialist and often ideologically tainted conceptual frameworks – something that, to an extent, is also true of Said's own concept of Orientalism<sup>1</sup>. The new approaches that have been developed in the past twenty-five years are based on rejecting the view of West and Northern European experiences as normative and of the world through binary oppositions (e.g. between the colonisers and the colonised; the imperial centre and the colonial periphery; nationalism and empire). Instead the close intertwining and mutually constitutive nature of these categories has become the focus of attention. It is now readily acknowledged by most scholars that the umbrella terms "nationalism", "colonialism" and "imperialism" describe highly varied processes, which are shaped

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1. For an excellent overview of the developments in the field of new imperial history in the past twenty five years, see S. Tuoma, M. Waldstein, "Empire and Space".

by their specific temporary and geographical settings. It is these settings that increasingly constitute the prime subjects of study<sup>2</sup>.

The incorporation of Russian and Soviet experiences into comparative historical studies has further allowed us to see the developments in the east of Europe and other non-Western parts of the world not as unique or abnormal, but indicative of practices that are also present, yet often suppressed, in dominant narratives about the (West) European self. As a result, alongside other empires, Russia historically merges not as a one-nation dominated policy. In this interpretation, non-equal statuses of territories and peoples in Russia and elsewhere usually do not fit with simple dichotomies.

Of particular concern for contemporary scholarship is the complexity of the circulation of the imperial imagery, knowledge and practices in multiple directions between East and West, North and South<sup>3</sup>. The so-called “peripheral empires” (the late coming German empire and Russia) are no longer understood as being shaped by a mere borrowing of the normative models from the European core – Britain and France<sup>4</sup>. Instead, scholars have begun to emphasize creative adaptations of imperial models from the West in Europe’s “peripheries”, as well as the contribution of the latter to the political imagery and practices of Western colonialism.

This multi-directional circulation embraces not just broadly defined Europe, but also Europe’s colonial domains, whose decisive impact on the processes in European metropolises are now also readily acknowledged<sup>5</sup>. As Christopher Bayly has pointed out, already in the 18th and 19th centuries the word was far more global than we often recognise<sup>6</sup>. In this context the complex issue of the agency of colonised subjects in driving forward modernisation processes in Europe, especially in the production of different forms of scientific knowledge, has become a hotly debated issue<sup>7</sup>. The latest research has also emphasized a crucial role of

2. J. A. Hall, “Nationalisms”.

3. See, for instance, a special issue on transnational and transimperial circulations, *Kritika* (2008).

4. For instance, the journal *Ab Imperio* promotes studies of new imperial history and nationalism with the focus on Europe’s “peripheries”.

5. See, for instance F. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*.

6. Ch. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914*.

7. See an overview of the debate in V. Tolz, *Russia’s Own Orient*, p. 113.

actors with hybrid identities, who struggle to transcend their position of marginality, in achieving Europe's cultural advancements<sup>8</sup>.

By bringing together the latest developments in postcolonial studies with the focus on the originality, creativity and far-reaching impact of actors, practices and processes in various "peripheral" settings, "Orientalism of the Margins" facilitates a dialogue among a multi-disciplinary group of scholars, who offer a wealth of new insights into both little and well known historical events and cultural phenomena, as well as a nuanced (re-)reading of historical documents and literary texts.

The introductory chapter sets the framework for reading subsequent contributions. At first glance, it looks paradoxical that Philippe Bornet and Svetlana Gorshenina use as their point of comparison such strikingly different cases – Russia (the core of Europe's largest continental empire) and India (the most important overseas colony of the British empire). But, in fact, this seemingly unusual comparison, with the emphasis on similarities, has its origins in Russia's own intellectual tradition of contrasting the Russian empire's presumed specificity in managing Eurasia's cultural diversity with the Western practices of colonialism. As Bornet and Gorshenina point out, such 19th- and early-20th-century Russian thinkers as geographers Mikhail Veniukov and Andrei Snesev claimed their country's special affinity with India, thus paving the way for the view, particularly prominent in the Soviet period and popular today, of the West's imperialist desires towards the rest of the world, against which Russia should strive to protect itself. In this context, the appropriation by today's Russian nationalists of Said's model of Orientalism to attack the West's supposedly imperialist intentions towards Russia, which is discussed by David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, appears not as an odd curiosity, but as a continuation of the arguments dating back to the 19th century.

Bornet and Gorshenina do not, of course, accept such arguments at face value. Instead, they use the proposed comparison in order to demonstrate how various power relations, which are often assumed to be stable, are, in fact, inherently fluid and are constantly reinvented and redefined. Thus, from the 19th century onwards, Indian nationalist intellectuals and activists creatively appropriated for their own use not only political and cultural concepts from Britain, but also expressed a

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8. A. Weisberger, "Marginality and Its Directions".

great interest in Russia as an alternative model of political emancipation and modernisation. In turn, it is the participation of representatives of Buddhist communities in Russia's Siberian periphery that helped transform Russia's study of India from being a follower of West European intellectual developments into a leader of this field of scholarship in the 1910s and the 1920s<sup>9</sup>.

The subversion of common perceptions of centre-periphery relations informs many other articles in this issue. The multi-directional circulation of ideas between the colonisers and the colonised is also explored in Borner's article on the translations of Tamil texts by English and German missionary Orientalists, which were influenced by the translators' encounters with representatives of the Tamil elites in the early 20th century. In turn, Blain Auer looks at the construction of the image of Islamic India under the British colonial rule as an interactive process, involving English, Persian and Urdu traditions of historical writing. In Nicola Pozza's contribution, the founder of India's Communist Party, Manabendra Nath Roy, appears not at the margins of European politics, but as an original critic of the European hegemonic discourses at the centre of the Comintern's drive for the de-colonisation of Asia.

In her contribution, Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz uses the example of Russia's main Buddhist people, the Buriyad-Mongols, to challenge a common notion of "the West that acts and the East that reacts". While Auer and Borner's focus is partly on European actors, Kollmar-Paulenz places the colonial subjects themselves at the centre of her attention. Reminding us that the world view of Buriyad-Mongol intellectuals, who at the turn of the 20th century actively interacted with the Russian cultural elites in St. Petersburg, was strongly influenced by the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, she argues that the development of the European knowledge culture cannot be understood without a thorough study of Europeans' encounters with non-European cultural epistemes.

In fact, this argument was already tentatively articulated by European intellectuals more than a hundred years ago. A critical analysis of this earlier reassessment of the origins of modern European knowledge is offered in Maya Burger's article on Helena Blavatsky, a Russian occult thinker and a co-founded in 1875 of the Theosophical Society, whose

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9. V. Tolz, *Russia's Own Orient*, p. 101-110.

intellectual pursuits were influenced by an explicit acknowledgement of the inherent limitations of the European epistemology.

To be sure, Russia, in its various incarnations, has been not only the arena of questioning and subverting dominant colonial and Orientalist paradigms. It has been also an active player in the production of pan-European hegemonic discourses and policies of imperialism and colonialism, based on the reinforcement of unequal power relations and cultural and political hierarchies. Several articles in the volume offer case studies of the specific aspects of this trend, including Till Mostowlansky's exploration of the former Russian-British frontier between Central and South Asia and Ingo Strauch's analysis of the encounter of German and Russian imperial scholars in Xinjiang at the turn of the 20th century. Gorshenina's article on the writings about Central Asia of an important player in France's colonial policies, General Léon de Beylié's, offers a detailed account of the mechanisms through which enduring stereotypical clichés of Saidian Orientalism about this region were produced through the circulation of ideas borrowed from a range of West European and Russian sources.

Several contributions to this special issue take up a controversial subject of the extent to which the centre-periphery relations in the Soviet Union differed from those that characterised Western colonial empires in the 19th and the 20th centuries. Boris Chukhovich's conclusion that parallels can be drawn between colonial architecture in the Maghreb and India, on the one hand, and modernist architectural projects in Soviet Central Asia in the 1950s and the 1960s, on the other, shows how the postcolonial paradigm could be productively applied to the study of the Soviet political system. The fact that, all the Soviet rhetoric in support of de-colonisation and all the Soviet critique of Western colonialism notwithstanding, the Soviet state reproduced and reinvented old hierarchies and unequal power relations is highlighted in two further contributions to the volume. Elena Simonato's detailed account of the politics around the creation of alphabets for various minority groups in the USSR in the 1920s demonstrates how this seemingly democratising and emancipating project was, in reality, informed by a deeply hierarchical view of cultures. In Ekaterina Velmezova's article we find an example of how the Orientalising attitude towards Georgia, which in the Russian cultural tradition dates back to the early 19th century, was

unreflectively reproduced by one of the most vocal critiques of the Soviet regime, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn<sup>10</sup>.

The final cluster of this issue contains articles by Martine Hennard Dutheil de la Rochère, Anas Sareen and Anastasia de La Fortelle on how cross-cultural perspectives and an in-between position of, at times deliberately assumed, marginality allow literary figures in India and Russia, such as Geetanjali Shree and Viktor Pelevin, to unsettle East-West, centre-periphery and self-other binary oppositions.

While adopting approaches from different disciplines from historical, literary and linguistic studies and focusing on different historical periods, this collection of articles invites readers into an exciting process of developing new analytical tools for capturing “messy realities” and accounting for complexities and ambiguities which lie at the core of every historical and cultural trend.

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10. S. Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy*.

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